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An investigation into some unidentified Ecuadorian mammals

field report by Angel Morant Forés

O Morant Forés (12 October 1999)

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In the summer of 1999 I boarded a flight for Southamerica to conduct cryptozoological fieldwork in Southern Ecuador's Amazonian region, more precisely in the Macas region (Morona-Santiago province).

But, why Ecuador ? I chose this country for several reasons. In the first place, as a spaniard I preferred to visit a spanish-speaking area to avoid communication problems. Moreover, Ecuador is at present a politically stable country where foreigners can travel without being threatened by guerrillas or drug-traffikers. Another advantage of Ecuador as a field for this kind of research lies in its zoological richness. Regarded as one of the most important biodiversity hotspots in the world, Ecuador is home to 1580 bird species, 271 mammal species and 374 reptile species and there are many still-unexplored regions which could harbour animals unknown to science.

From the beginning, it was clear to me I would need the collaboration of native people, whose knowledge of local wildlife has played an important role in the history of zoological discoveries. Many native groups live in the rainforests of Ecuador's Amazonian region but, perhaps, the best known of them all are the shuar indians noted for their custom of keeping the head of their enemies as trophies (a practice which, fortunately, was erradicated long ago). Before

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departing, I consulted several anthropological books on the shuar indians which supplied me with valuable criptozoological information. During my bibliographic research, I noticed that Shuar language has as many as six words for different types of big cats whereas science only recognizes

the existence of two such animals in Ecuador: the puma (japa-yawa) and the jaguar (yampinkia-yawa).
Most shuar communities live in the Morona-Santiago province whose capital, Macas, is well communicated with the rest of the country. I stablished my headquarters in Macas and over the two next weeks (from 11 to 24 June), I visited five villages (9 de Octubre, Macuma, Sauntza, Sevilla-Don Bosco and Wapula) to question native hunters about the local wildlife. Whenever I went, I took with me a book illustrated with dozens of pictures of Ecuadorian mammals which I used to test the wisdom of my informants. Since I knew the Shuar name of a great deal of Amazonian species -- I spent three days in Quito gathering information on this subject -- I would hand the book to my informants and ask them to locate a particular animal, then another one and so on until we had gone through almost all of the photos in the book. It goes without saying most of my informants showed an extraordinary knowledge of local wildlife. Through interviews with native hunters I learnt of several animals which could be unknown to zoology, mostly cats. The majority of reports I collected came from people who had not seen the animals themselves but had heard of them. Except for Macuma, my fieldwork took place in a densely populated area from which some of these animals seem to have disappeared many years ago. Still, I was assured one can still find them deep in the rainforest, above all in the Trans- Cutucú region. None of my informants attached fairy-tale traits to any of these animals and spoke of them in a quite down-to-earth way.
Esakar-paki: an unknown species of peccary ?
According to the Shuar people there are three kinds of peccaries inhabiting the Amazonian region of Ecuador. This is a most interesting claim since mammal reference books only mention the existence of two species the collared peccari (Pecari tajacu) and the white-lipped peccary (Tayassu pecari), both of them dark in colour (a third species, Catagonus wagneri, was described in 1975, but it is only living in the Gran Chaco of Paraguay, not in Ecuador). The Shuar speak of a third unidentified peccary they call esakar-paki. According to them, esakar-paki is the smallest of all peccaries, has reddish fur and lives in troops made up of 50 or 60 individuals. When I showed photos to my informants, many of them identified the esakar-paki with a juvenile specimen of collared peccary (Indeed, young collared peccaries have reddish fur). I was told the esakar-paki is the only peccary which attacks humans without provocation.
A Shuar speleologist called Marcelo Churuwia told me that he had been chased by a troop of esakar-paki in the rainforest on the Ecuador- Peru border and had to climb a tree for safety. Churuwia said the attacking animals were reddish-brown in colour.
Not all of the descriptions given to me are like the above-mentioned ones. Three hunters which I interviewed stated the esakar-paki resembles very much the white-lipped peccary except for the fact that it is much more agressive. According to them, esakar-paki troops are leaded by a small, old individual, reddish in colour, which is particularly fearless of humans.
This animal is said to abound in the Sangay National Park and the Trans-Cutucú region.
Shiashia-yawá: an albino form of jaguar ?
All accounts of the shiashia I obtained were similar it is a spotted cat white in colour and smaller than a jaguar (Panthera onca) but bigger than an ocelot (Felis pardalis). An old Shuar from Sevilla-Don Bosco, Carlos Pichama, told me the fur of the shiashia is covered by solid black

spots which are more tighly packed than the rosettes typical of jaguars. I collected two eyewitness reports from people who claimed to have killed this animal in the past. Of course, there are numerous explanations for unusual color patterns in cats that are not related to taxonomic

differences. So, it is possible that the shiashia is just an albino form of jaguar. However, all my informants insisted that this animal is smaller than jaguars (around 1.30 m long).
Pamá-yawá: the tapir tiger
Shuar hunters also informed me of the existence of a jungle-dwelling, very large cat called pamá-yawá (yawá meaning "tiger" and pamá "tapir", that is, the tapir tiger). It is described as a uniformly dark grey coloured animal the size of an Amazonian tapir (Tapirus terrestris). I was told this is the only cat which predates on tapirs. Some people I interviewed stressed that the paws of pamá-yawá are of enormeous proportions.
Pedro Anan Churuwia, a Wapula hunter, is one of the few persons who claims to have encountered the spoor of this animal in the jungle. According to him, one pawprint was as big as both of his hands (Let me say that Pedro is a very small person with diminute hands).
Juan Bautista Rivadeneira, a Macas settler, saw a pamá-yawá in 1969 on the Morona river at a distance of 50 or 60 meters. The sighting lasted ten minutes during which the animal came out of the river and walked lazily on a sandy beach before disapearing from view. He claims it was around 2 m long and 1.30 m in shoulder height. On seeing it, a shuar guide who was accompayning him exclaimed: "pamá-yawá!"
This cat is said to inhabit the Trans-Cutucú region as well as the area surrounding the Sangay vulcano.
Tshenkutshen: the rainbow tiger
Tshenkutshen is a quite perplexing animal judging by the reports I collected. It is described as a black cat the size of a jaguar which has several stripes of different colors (black, white, red and yellow) on its chest. "Just like a rainbow"-- I was told by a native hunter. In contrast with other big cats thsenkutshen is said to be an exceptionally good tree-climber. In fact, my informants told me the tshenkutshen is capable of incredible acrobatic feats like jumping from a treetrunk to another with devilish speed. Regarded as the most dangerous of all jungle animals, tshenkutshen's forepaws are described as monkey-like except for the fact that it has very large claws instead of nails.
This appears to be the same species which a Macas settler, Policarpio Rivadeneira, killed in 1959 in a low mountain called Cerro Kilamo near the Abanico river. Rivadeneira was walking in the rainforest when he saw a strange animal leaping from tree to tree. Fearing an attack, he aimed his gun and shoot it in the head. Upon examination, Rivadeneira discovered it was a most extraordinary jaguar-sized cat. Its pelage was like that of a shiashia (white with black spots) but it had a series of multicoloured stripes running across its chest which differentiated it from all other cats he had ever seen. Three more details called his attention the animal's arms were very muscular, it had a hump on its back and the forepaws were very much like a monkey's (with flat rather than round palms).
Apart from Rivadeneira, another hunter told me that, except for the stripes, the thsenkutshen's pelage is very similar to that of a shiashia.
This strange beast is said to live in the Trans-Cutucú region, Sierra de Cutucú and the Sangay vulcano area near Chiguaza.

Entzaeia-yawá: the water tiger
Over the years many sightings of mystery cats with an aquatic lifestyle have been reported from Southamerica and Ecuador is no exception. According to the Shuar people the rivers of the Morona- Santiago province are the abode of a water- dwelling felid they call entzaeia-yaw■.
Unfortunately, almost all the accounts I gathered concerning this animal were rather vague. It

appears that water tigers show a wide range of colour morphs (black, white, brown and reddish). They are said to be nocturnal animals as big or somewhat bigger than a jaguar and with a bushy tail. Entzaeia-yawá is regarded as a most dangerous creature and attacks on humans are not rare. Carlos Pichama told me how a water-tiger had killed his cousin's wife in the course of a fishing trip to the Mangusas river (not far from Suantza). After setting up a camp on the rivershore, his cousin went on a hunting excursion to the rainforest leaving his wife alone. A couple of hours later, when he came back to the camp she had dissapeared. Following her footprints he arrived to a sandy beach at a place where the river formed a natural lake and cried out for her, but to no avail. Upon further examination, he located the spoor of a water-tiger which seemed to have been stalking his wife. Back in Suantza he told the story to her wife's parents who concluded that a water tiger had dragged her into the water. Next day, he and his brothers returned to the spot where the woman had been killed by the water tiger. The group of men exploded several charges of dinamite in the lake and saw the corpse of a long-haired reddish coloured animal of big size come at the surface. All my informants described the paws of the water tiger as being like a duck's (In fact, when I showed them some drawings of animal spoor, they would point to otter tracks as those which most ressembled the entzaeia-yawa's). When I showed the track of a bear's hindpaw to a native hunter he claimed it was very much like that of a water tiger because it had a flat palm. Could the entzaeia-yawá reports be based on sightings of giant otters (Pteronura brasiliensis)? I do not think so. For example, giant otters have a series of white blotches on the throat which have never been mentioned to me in accounts of water tigers. Moreover, Pteronura very rarely attacks humans whereas the entzaeia-yawá is regarded as a man-eater to the point that Shuar people avoid being alone while taking a bath in the river. It should be also stressed that although my book on Ecuadorian mammals carried a picture of a giant otter none of my informants identified it with a water tiger. The only eyewitness report containing a detailed description of this animal was given to me by Juan Bautista Rivadeneira. He saw a water tiger in 1989 at the mouth of the Jurumbaino river, a tributary of the Upano. It was a short-legged black cat bigger than a jaguar with a cow's tail. Its pawprints were described to me as being like those of an otter but without clawmarks.

Tsere-yawá a social jungle cat

Not all of the unidentified animals reported to me were of big size. Several native hunters spoke of a one meter long semiaquatic cat which is said to hunt in packs of 8 to 10 individuals. Shuar Indians call it tsere- yawá on account of its brown pelage (tsere meaning "brown capuchin monkey"). In 1999 a young man mamed Christian Chumbi from Sauntza saw eight of these animals at a distance of 15 meters in the river Yukipa.

During my research, I collected second-hand reports about other apparently unknown animals (a bear-like creature called ujea whose description reminded me of a giant ground sloth, a cat known as jiukam-yaw■ which allegedly hunts in packs and a maned "lion"). However, since I could not locate anyone who had seen these animals I have decided to exclude them from this paper.

An unknown aquatic mammal?

During my stay in Macas, I visited, together with a Shuar guide called Marcelo Cajecai, a small shop where there were skins, skulls, and other animal souvenirs for sale. As soon as I entered the shop, I spotted a curious stuffed animal which immediatly called my attention. It looked like a mole and had white fur with some brownish spots on its back. From the beginning, I realised this animal was something very rare. Still, I decided not to buy it because I was not sure wether ecuadorian authorities would allow me to take the animal with me to Spain. Now, I can say this decision was the biggest mistake in my life. However, I took some photos of the animal (figure 1).

Figure 1: unidentified mammal from Macas (photograph Angel Morant Forés)
When I returned to Spain, doctor Carlos Bonet, a zoologist, and myself, we consulted a lot of works on South-American mammals with the hope of identifying the Macas specimen. It goes without saying that we were unable to do so. Since then, I have got in touch with five mammalogists for help. One of them is convinced that the Macas specimen is Chironectes minimus, a marsupial known as the water opossum or yapock (figure 2). The other four agreed that the Macas specimen could belong to a species new to science.
Figure 2: the water opossum or yapock (Chironectes minimus)
The Macas specimen is 35 or 40 cm long, has a proboscis on its snout and webbed feet. It cannot be Chironectes minimus, because both males and females have a marsupial ventral pouch, whereas the Macas specimen has no pouch whatsoever. Moreover, the Macas specimen has a feature which rules out all known marsupials from South America: its fore feet are webbed, whereas in the yapock only the hind feet possess an interdigital web. The Macas specimen cannot be a rodent either, because rodents have no proboscis. Could it be an insectivore? Well, the only thing I can say is that none of the known South-American insectivores is aquatic all of them belong to the genus Cryptotis and are arboreal or terrestrial. I also investigated the origin of the stuffed specimen and learned from a Shuar that the mystery animal is common in local rivers.

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Since my return to Spain, I have tried of course several times to buy the animal through my contact in Macas, doctor Carlos Tovar. However, the owner of the shop has refused to sell it.
Of course, there is also the possibilty that the Macas specimen might be the work of a facetious taxidermist, having used a yapock, of which he would have sawn the pouch, changed the fore feet for the hind feet, and added a snout.
Future plans
Eventually, I would like to return to Ecuador to conduct more extensive fieldwork in the Trans-Cutucú region which remains poorly explored from a zoological point of view. I am convinced some of the animals mentioned in this paper might represent species unknown to zoology and that continued fieldwork could lead to their discovery.
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